

**Verreaux's Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus* persistently attacked by
Thick-billed Ravens *Corvus crassirostris***

On 16 September 1989 our attention was drawn to a group of four Thick-billed Ravens *Corvus crassirostris* at Redele, Illubabor Province, southwest Ethiopia. These ravens are normally a noisy species, but the present ones appeared to be unusually agitated in a nearby acacia tree.

As we approached, a Harrier Hawk *Polyboroides radiatus* flew off with two ravens in close pursuit and all disappeared from sight, but the ravens returned after about two minutes. Almost immediately afterwards, what appeared to be a Wahlberg's Eagle *Aquila wahlbergi* also flew away with another two ravens in pursuit. It landed in a nearby dead tree, and was thereafter ignored by the ravens. Although two possible candidates for the cause of the consternation had gone, the agitated calling continued unabated and was increased through the arrival of a pair of vociferous Cape Rooks *Corvus capensis*. It was now obvious that there was some other cause for the mobbing behaviour of the ravens. On closer approach we found a fully grown Verreaux's Eagle Owl *Bubo lacteus* perched high in the tree being closely attacked by the ravens. The Cape Rooks provided a rather more distant but very noisy support.

The owl was well placed within a tangle of dead twigs among which it was protected from the ravens' beaks which were only able to reach it one at a time through one opening among the branches. At this point one of the ravens, frustrated in its attempt to reach the owl, began to deliberately break off the twigs with its beak in order to increase the size of the opening. After a few minutes all four ravens adopted this activity and soon made an opening large enough for them all to enter and attack the owl from several directions. Despite their numbers, large size and powerful bills, the ravens were very wary of the owl, never facing it and always striking at it by jumping up or flying fast and pecking at it and aiming at its rear. After a few minutes of being forced to fight against four attackers simultaneously the owl took off, pursued by two ravens. It alighted in a nearby tree but was almost immediately forced to fly again into another where it remained until dark, continually mobbed by the ravens. It was not there the following morning and we did not see it again.

Of particular interest to us was the persistence and ferocity of the attacking ravens, and the fact that two other species of potential predators were also present, and apparently had been attracted to the scene. The late Leslie Brown (1972) has reported Verreaux's Eagle Owls preying on the young of Pied Crows *Corvus albus* and buzzards *Buteo* sp., so that probably all the corvids and raptors involved in the incident described here were reacting to the owl as a potential predator of their young.

Reference

BROWN, L. 1972. *African birds of prey*. 2nd edition. London: Collins.

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